

Democrats Daschle, Gephardt at Odds

Associated Press
Friday, June 29, 2001

WASHINGTON (AP) - For a second straight summer, the ebb and flow of the Missouri River has divided the top two Democratic leaders in Congress.

House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri wants to prevent the river's managers from altering its flow. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota is pressing for changes.

The disagreement has more to do with geography than politics. Daschle and those who live above Gavins Point Dam generally favor altering the flow, believing it will benefit recreational and environmental interests in their area. Those such as Gephardt who live downstream oppose the change because they say it will hurt farmers and the barge industry and heighten the risk of floods.

"We believe we can protect the wildlife on the Missouri, using the current water flow," Gephardt said. He also argues the existing flow is the best way for all states along the river to share equally in its resources.

Responds Daschle, "There's a tremendous imbalance in the economic interest of the downstream barge industry versus upstream recreation and wildlife benefits."

Gephardt won the first skirmish on Thursday, when the House approved a prohibition to the river flow as part of a \$23.7 billion energy and water bill.

The Army Corps of Engineers controls the flow with six large dams, the southernmost of which is Gavins Point, below Lewis and Clark Lake on the South Dakota-Nebraska border. The corps reduces the flow during the spring months when melting snow swells the river, and increases it in summer to keep barge traffic moving.

But lakes and reservoirs above Gavins Point are depleted when the corps releases more water. That can hurt tourism and recreation in Montana and the Dakotas.

The corps is expected to issue a new river management proposal in August calling for lower flows each summer and a spring rise about every third year, intended to mimic the flow before the river was dammed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is pushing for the recommendations, saying the current management has propelled two native bird species, the piping plover and least tern, and a fish, the pallid sturgeon, to the brink of extinction.

Environmental groups are attacking Gephardt, who often is an important

ally.

``What's amazing is that the first assault on the Endangered Species Act in 2001 is coming from the would-be speaker of the House, not the Bush administration," said Scott Faber, spokesman for the group Environmental Defense.

Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., said Daschle and others are ignoring the risk of increased flooding downstream.

``For us to displace thousands and thousands of families who live up and down the river so that South Dakota can have its own Lake of the Ozarks is ridiculous," she said.

Last year, the dispute spilled over into the presidential race when then-President Clinton vetoed a spending bill that barred plans for a seasonal spring rise and low summer flows. The move angered voters in the battleground state of Missouri, which narrowly voted for President Bush over Al Gore.

It remains to be seen how the new political landscape will affect the fight. The Bush White House has indicated it backs the prohibition, but with Daschle now leading the Senate he can influence the version of the energy and water bill that emerges.

If Daschle is able to keep out the flow provision, the issue will be decided in a conference committee.

``It'll be a huge fight in the conference, partly regional, partly political," predicted Rep. John Thune, R-S.D., who voted against the House measure.

---=

On the Net:

Missouri River Basin Association: <http://www.mrba-missouri-river.com/>

Army Corps of Engineers Missouri River Region:
<http://www.nwd.usace.army.mil/>

American Rivers: <http://www.americanrivers.org>